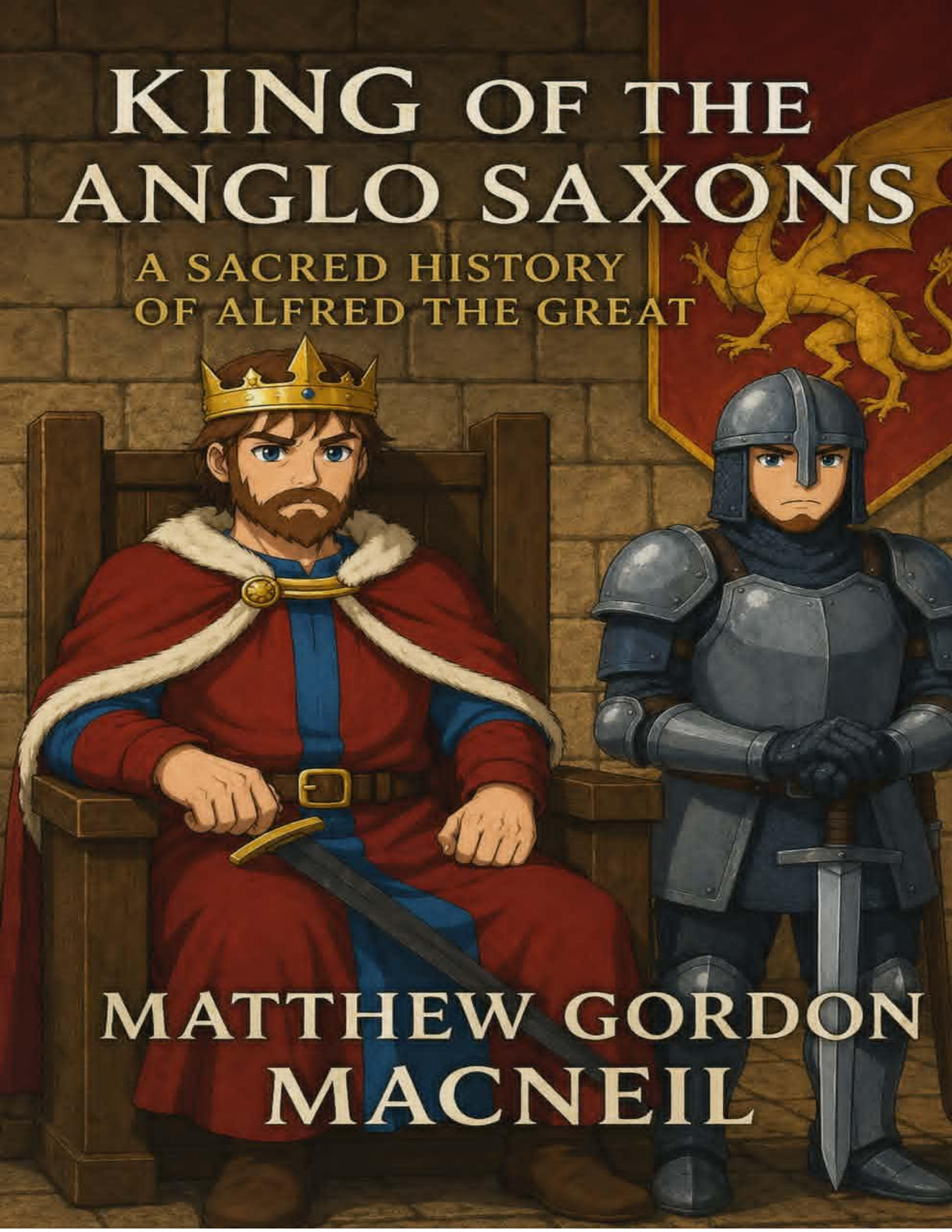
KING OF THE ANGLO SAXONS

A SACRED HISTORY OF ALFRED THE GREAT



MATTHEW GORDON MACNEIL

King of the Anglo Saxons: A Sacred History of Alfred the Great

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

Chapter 1: The Visit to Rome

The man who would one day become known as Alfred the Great was born not the eldest of his father or even the second

eldest, but was the final sixth child born to an already middle aged father and mother.

Born in the village of Wantage in 848 AD in the month of August, in the county of Berkshire while his parents, King Ethelwulf and his wife, Lady Osburga, were passing through conducting business in the county.

Osburga, a noblewoman of Jutish heritage, was a kind and pious woman known for the love she showed her children, the common people, and the clergy. Small and slender she possessed a grace in movement and manners few could match. A beautiful mass of dark brown hair framed her face, matched only by her attractive features.

Her father, Oslac, was a Thane in the King's court and the overseer of the royal household. Of royal ancestry himself, a descendant of Arwald, the first and only King of the Isle of Wight, Oslac enjoyed the trust and friendship of Ethelwulf and his father, Egbert.

Through his maternal grandfather Alfred was a direct descendant of Jews who migrated from the Holy Land after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD and settled in Denmark, forming the Jutes tribe and gradually adopting Heathen ways and beliefs.

Oslac also possessed Gothic blood, being a descendant of one

Hrongnir, a Gothic warrior who served Arwald's great grandfather Stuffo and married his daughter Eadbertha, becoming Arwald's maternal grandfather through his daughter Edda, the King's mother. Hrongnir, a scion of the House of Odin, being a descendant of Balder Torvaldsson, King of Trondheim and son Torvald Alexanndersson, the second last Emperor of the Northern Empire, was just one link Alfred had back to the legendary Imperial line.

On his father's side Alfred was a descendant of Cerdic, the first Duke of the West Saxons under Arthur Pendragon. Cerdic's descendant, Cuthwulf, married Guinevere Pendragon, daughter of Constantine Pendragon, Arthur's nephew/successor and Emperor of Rome, King of Britain, and Overlord of much of Europe, Africa and Asia.

Through Constantine's paternal grandmother, Igraine, he was a descendant of the House of Odin and through Constantine's wife Maria, Alfred was a descendant of the Sasanian Dynasty of Iran and the Ashina Khans of the Khazars.

This is but a small bit of the King's ancestry, but to record it all would require a single volume all of its own.

Lady Osburga remained in Wantage several days after the baby Prince's birth, the King heading on to another town to continue his tour of the county.

While staying in the village the Lady of Wessex was in the care of Elfgar, Wantage's Head man and local Fyrd Commander, and his wife, a Frankish woman by the name of Hildegard, a great great granddaughter of Odo, Duke of Aquitane, the mighty Frankish warrior who aided Charles Martel in repelling the Muslim invasion of Europe.

Hildegard, much like Osburga, was a pious woman, devoted very much in the ways of the Lord. Everyday she went out into Wantage's streets offering meals to the poor and those travellers in need of one. Elfgar, too, was a generous man, always inviting dozens to his home every Sunday to Sup with him and his family free of charge.

Osburga partook in one of these meals being the guest of honour. Wearing a white dress, her hair covered in a shawl, the Lady of Wessex sat alongside Hildegard while Elfgar toasted her and King Ethelwulf, praising them for bringing prosperity to Wessex and wishing them a long reign and many years of happiness together.

Once she was well enough to travel again Osburga and her newborn baby, who's name meant Elf Counsel, implying his parents hoped the Elves, enlightened beings who had once lived alongside their ancestors and from whom they both descended, would guide their son in his life, left Wantage to meet up with the King at a small hamlet known as

Martensholme.

While the Lady had been absent Ethelwulf had sent messengers to the Somerset countryside to the estate of Edwulf, a Thane in his court and his eldest son, born out of wedlock when the King, then a Prince, was fifteen in 815.

Edwulf, thirty three now and a father himself to a young baby named Ealhmund after his paternal great grandfather, met his father's messenger with a welcoming smile, offering them food and drink.

The King and he, while not especially close, had a bond like most father and sons do, but the Thane hadn't seen him in over a year, preferring to tend to his estate than attend court whenever possible.

Now, with messengers at his home, Edwulf knew his self imposed isolation was over. He asked them what his father wanted after they finished their meal.

The King, they said, wanted him to join him at Maretnsholme where they would discuss a more permanent place at court for him and his family.

The idea of living year round at the capital of Winchester, which was still a robust and richly cultured city as it had been back during the Arthurian Age when it was known as Camelot, did not appeal to him. Being among all those people,

scheming, greedy nobles and stiff necked clerics made his skin crawl.

But, a dutiful son, he promised to go to the village where his father was and hear him out. After seeing to it his wife and relatives looked after the messengers Edwulf put on his armour and with a handful of retiners he rode for Martensholme.

Arriving there he was greeted by the King and his stepmother happily being taken directly to a meal where the three dined in private.

During the course of this meal, consisting of roasted duck, venison, and several greens, Ethelwulf informed his eldest of the birth of Alfred. Edwulf, close to his other brothers and sister, was delighted to have a new addition to the family.

Ethelwulf went on to explain he wanted Edwulf to become his youngest brother's guardian, his protector. At first Edwulf thought his father was joking, he never expressed this desire for any of his other siblings, but when the King reassured him he meant what he said Edwulf was speechless.

Why him? He asked finally.

Because, his father said, he was the most skilled warrior in the Kingdom. A good Christian, and learned, virtures he wanted Alfred to inherit. When asked why he wanted the

youngest child to be under his protection and not his eldest with Osburga, the twenty year old Athelstan, the King said something that surprised his son.

Ethelwulf claimed a year before Alfred's birth he had a dream in which England, not just Wessex but all the English Kingdoms, were engulfed in flame.

A voice, from where or whom he could not see, told him that this was a possibility that awaited the English people in the future. That the Northmen would continue to ravage England's shores and one day there would come a time of great importance where Dane and Saxon would battle for supremecy over the Kingdoms.

The voice said it could not see who would be the ultimate victor as it was undetermined, but said a son not yet born would play a vital role in it, should he live to see adulthood.

Then the King woke up.

With the dream explained Edwulf understood his father's reasoning, but still questioned whether he was the best man for the job.

To this the King would not hear any protests. He wanted his eldest to come to Winchester and take up the position of Alfred's Shield Thane, his bodyguard. Unable to refuse, Edwulf agreed.

The three ate together with minimal conversation thereafter, Edwulf mulling over what his father's dream meant and how he would explain to his wife that they must leave their comfortable estate to live at the royal court.

His wife, Edith, a noble lady who was half Welsh on her mother's side, would certainly not approve.

A descendant of Ida the Flame Bearer, an Angle Chieftain during Arthur Pendragon's reign, through her father Wulfnoth and one of many descendants of Kamber, the first King of Wales, through her mother, Edith was not known to hide her feelings on issues that displeased her and Edwulf knew this, and thus dreaded returning to Somerset to break the news.

But he rode back nonetheless and, like he expected, Edith was not pleased to hear her father in law's request. She asked if there was any way they could persuade him to call on someone else. Edwulf didn't believe there was and said so, to which she resigned herself to moving to Winchester.

On September 4th Edwulf and his family arrived in the capital of Wessex, being greeted by the sounds and smells of the city. The grandeur it enjoyed as Camelot was, in many ways, over. The international trade, while not as robust as it was under the Pendragon Emperors, remained strong, traders from Arabia, Africa, Asia, and other parts of Europe all mingled on the streets of Winchester.

A few immigrant families, mainly from mainland Europe, also called the city home, as did families of Arab and North African descent.

While it was no longer the capital of one of the greatest Empires the world had seen, Winchester still had its charms, though not to Edith who much preferred the tranquility of the countryside.

The palace, known in later times as Winchester Castle, Ethelwulf and his family lived in was the very same palace Arthur and his successors lived in centuries ago, being kept up to date by the House of Cerdic to both honour their Pendragon ancestors and for the prestige of living in a beautifully crafted castle.

Edwulf and his wife would get a chamber to themselves while Ealhmund would be housed with his cousins. It took some time getting used to it all but the Thane, Edith and their boy settled in eventually, becoming part of a big family.

Edwulf's main duties most days was to accompany Lady Osburga, the Lady of Wessex not one to let maidservants look after her own children. This allowed the Thane to really get to know his stepmother, who up to this time he rarely spoke to.

In this way the two became close and Edwulf interacted daily with his younger siblings excluding Athelstan who was in Kent

ruling as its King under the Overlordship of their father.

The first years of baby Alfred's life would see the increase in Viking attacks upon English shores. In one such battle his elder brother Athelstan was mortally wounded in 851 in a battle with Viking forces off the coast of Kent.

The Kentish King won the day but received a sword wound through the abdomen. Athelstan lingered a few days before passing away, leaving his father and his family bereft.

Little Alfred, of course, was only three when his elder brother passed away and barely knew him. Osburga did her best, despite her grief over Athelstan, to continue to look after her remaining children.

By the time Alfred was four Osburga was teaching him how to read and write, teaching him how to do so by reading him the great English Epic poem Beowulf.

The Beowulf of the poem was an ancestor to Alfred on his father's side, known in West Saxon as Beowa, and he had been a model for the ideal Saxon warrior as far back as Cerdic.

The poem became Alfred's favorite and in later life he would translate it into West Saxon from an Anglian original, this translation becoming the basis for the poem we still have today.

Alfred, like most of his contempoaries including his family,

believed in the existance of Dragons, trolls, Dwarves, and Elves, so for him the poem wasn't simply fiction, it was history, and he took inspiration from it the rest of his life in the trials he faced.

In 853 Ethelwulf made a pledge to the Pope to visit Rome, a dream of his since he was young, but increasing Viking raids made it impossible for him to leave due to the fear Ethelbald, his third eldest son and now his heir where Athelstan was dead, would be unable to repel an invasion if it came.

In the council chambers of the Witan, the grand Assembly of West Saxon nobles made up of Ealdorman from across the Kingdom, the King and his men discussed what to do. All were devout Christians and did not want to break the King's word to the Pope, but they also agreed Ethelwulf himself could not go.

Neither could Ethelbald, the King fearful of something happening to his heir. In the end the Witan decided that Alfred and his elder brother Ethelred, as the youngest and, as harsh as it may sound, the least important of Ethelwulf's children (in a political sense), would be the two to go in his father's place.

Osburga was less than happy about the idea but she did not overtly oppose her husband's decision. Instead, knowing who Ethelwulf meant to entrust her sons to, she went to Edwulf to

make him promise he would protect his brothers with his life, which he swore to do in the name of the Holy Virgin Mary.

This promise was not a hollow one. Travelling in 9th century Europe was fraught with dangers even for royal pilgrims. Edwulf and his brothers might face bandits or roaming war bands on their way to the Eternal city.

Alfred wanted his mother to go with them as soon as he was told, not wishing to be parted from her for any lengthy period of time. Of course this couldn't happen, Osburga was required to remain to look after her other children and help Ethelwulf in matters of State. To help ease his discomfort from being apart the Lady of Wessex gave her youngest her personal copy of Beowulf, telling him to read it whenever he was feeling lonely and missing her.

It took a few weeks for everything to be prepared but in early spring Edwulf and his younger brothers set off for Rome, sailing from Portland harbour in Dorset.

Landing in the Kingdom of West Francia in what is present day France Alfred's party was met with a warm welcome by emisarries of King Charles the Bald, a friend of Ethelwulf's and who's grandfather, Charlemagne, had allowed Alfred's grandfather and great uncle, Egbert and Eadberht, to find

safety in the Frankish court when their father, Ealhmund, had been killed in battle in 784.

Taken to the King's capital of Laon the West Saxons were thrown a lavish feast and where Alfred and Ethelred played with Charles' sons Louis and Lothair.

Lothair in particular drew Alfred's interest because he was disabled, unable to walk. Unlike many of the adults who saw disabilities as a punishment from God for sins committed by parents, Alfred and his brother couldn't care less about them, enjoying his company just as much as Louis', creating a friendship that would last their whole lives.

Alfred's compassion, learned from his mother at a young age, would be one of his defining traits as a person. A true believer in Christ, both in his teachings and in his resurrection, he saw it as his duty to show compassion to all people, regardless of their station or state of body, and it all started as a young boy.

The West Saxon entourage stayed a few days in Laon before moving on heading towards Italy where Lothair I, Charles' elder brother, ruled as Holy Roman Emperor.

Edwulf was able to make sure his brothers and their servants made it into Italy safely with no bandit attacks taking place. While stopped in the town of Brescia the entourage stayed in the monastery of San Salvatore where little Alfred and

Ethelred wrote down their names in the monatsery's Book of Life showing they stayed there and which can still be read today.

When they arrived in Rome they were greeted by Pope John VIII, an Englishman like themselves, hailing from the Kingdom of Mercia in the English Midlands and a long time resident of the city.

John was an intelligent and capable man who began his life in the church as a young child, his parents being poor Mercian farmers who, having three other children, couldn't afford to feed them all. Wanting John, who's original English name was Oddgar, to thrive, they sent him to the local church where he was taken in and made a brother, eventually moving to Rome in his young adulthood.

This was the story the Pope himself told Edwulf as the two men walked towards the Papal palace, the Thane's younger brothers in front of them marveling at the grandeur of the ancient city.

Alfred, so amazed by the stone buildings, turned around and asked his elder brother if he too thought it was incredible how they looked.

Edwulf smiled and nodded, agreeing with him on the majesty of it, pointing out that many of their ancestors through the

Pendragon line helped forge and build Rome, making Alfred marvel anew at it all.

In the papal palace the two youngest sons of Ethelwulf were given blue robes as gifts by the Pope and conferred the title of Consul as was Edwulf though, for whatever reason, he did not receive a robe like his siblings.

For two weeks Alfred and Ethelred played in the Papal halls while Edwulf, a lover of books much like his stepmother, enjoyed reading through the Vatican's vast library and all three dined with Pope John every evening.

When the two weeks were up and the West Saxons were about to leave the Eternal City to return to England something truly unexpected happened.

The Pope went into labour.

It turned out that 'John' was actually a woman masquerading as a man all this time. The story she outlined for Edwulf was, for the most part, true, save her name and gender.

Her name was not Oddgar but Joan, being born to a Frankish father and English mother in Mercia. Sent to a church she fell in love with one of the brothers there, Beornwulf, and the two began secret affair.

When Brother Beornwulf was sent to the continent Joan, as Brother Oddgar, accompanied him. She used her intelligence

and skill in clerical matters to rise through the ranks of the Catholic church, her peers being none the wiser, until she became Pope as John VIII.

Of course this revelation sent shockwaves across Rome and Italy, causing angry mobs to form in the streets outside the Papal palace demanding she and her baby be handed over for execution.

The horror Alfred and Ethelred must have endured is unimaginable, but their brother kept them safe, and not only them, but also Joan and her newborn son.

The West Saxon Thane refused to allow the priests and Cardinals to hand Joan over to the blood thirsty mob, threatening to kill any who tried.

It took a day of arguing back and forth between Edwulf and his now hostile hosts but he managed to extract a promise of protection for himself, his brothers, and the now disgraced Pope to leave Italy safely.

The next morning they left, Joan cradling her baby, named Edwulf in honour of their saviour, in her arms. She put up with verbal abuse from bystanders but none dared approach with Papal guards leading the way. The Thane also had his sword drawn, ready to cut down any who might even step his way.

The West Saxons left Italy without incident and returned to

England safely. Joan and her son were given a home close to Edwulf's estate and granted royal protection by Ethelwulf. Here the former Pope lived out the remainnder of her life on a pension, passing away in 890.

Her son would become a warrior in his namesake's retinue and die in battle defending Alfred and his family during the Viking attack on Chippenham 878.

Once back home Alfred dived right back into his studies under his mother, getting lost in the numerous books she shared with him and at five started to train under Edwulf with a sword, his father wishing him to be a capable warrior.

While Alfred and his eldest brother trained a Viking army landed on the Isle of Sheppey off the Kentish coast during the cold Wessex winter, conquering the island and setting up a base there, raiding nearby villages on the mainland but not venturing further until spring.

When spring arrived Ethelwulf and Ethelbald led the West Saxon and Kentish Fyrds against the Danes, driving them out of Kent and into eastern England where they continued to ravage other Kingdoms before ultimately departing.

Alfred, while having a vague idea of where his father and brother went, gave little thought to it, more concerned with playing with Ethelred and fighting with Edwulf, his childhood

blissful.

The turning point came in the fall of 857 when Lady Osburga began throwing up uncontrollably, frightening her husband, children, and their servants while at dinner.

She took to bed and the best doctors in the Kingdoms were called upon evaluate her condition but none could cure it.

What Osburga had was late stage stomach cancer, a certain death sentence in Anglo Saxon times.

Despite her illness the Lady of Wessex rose as much as possible to attend Court and sit at the King's side. She continued to instruct Alfred and Ethelred, counsel Ethelbald, now King of Kent, via letters.

It pained Alfred to see his mother's suffering and he asked many questions of the visiting priests and monks as to why God would allow her to experience such things. The clerics, as best they could, tried explaining to the young boy the reasons why God allows those things into his creation, but for a small boy scared and confused, they offered little solace.

Lady Osburga was able to celebrate Christmas with her family, she and Ethelwulf giving their children presents. A year earlier she had commissioned a copy of Homer's Iliad to be translated into West Saxon so she could give it to Alfred as a present and they could read it together, and it was completed

just in time.

That night the two stayed up into the wee hours of the morning reading about the Trojan War and the great heroes that fought in it, Alfred falling asleep in his mother's lap.

In early January 858 Osburga's health took a fatal turn. By January 28th she was gone, passing away in her bed with Ethelwulf and Edwulf by her side.

At her request Alfred and his siblings went to see her the day before she died. She did her best to comfort them and told each one she would always be with them. She asked them to pray for her.

When she died Alfred was inconsolable. He wept for months afterwards, unable to come to terms with his mother's loss.

It was only when, one night in June, he saw her in a dream telling him she was watching over him as she had promised that he began to recover.

For the rest of his life Alfred cherished the memory of his mother. His most prized possessions always being the books she had given him, items he would carry with him until the day he too passed away.

Chapter 2: Ethelbald's Rebellion

Ethelwulf's loss of his wife greatly affected him on a personal level but as King of the West Saxons he remained strong for his people. A few months after Osburga's death he received a letter from Burgred, the King of Mercia, asking for aid in repelling Welsh raids against Mercian frontier towns.

Burgred was just not a fellow King, he was Ethelwulf's son in law, having married his only daughter Ethelswith in 855, so the bond and alliance between them was of utmost importance in keeping strong.

Raising an army in both Wessex and Kent Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, and his fourth eldest Ethelberht, now nineteen and eager for battle honours, marched to Mercia's aid. Spending all of March raiding Welsh border towns and villages, slaying a large number of people in the process.

Through these raids Ethelbald and Ethelberht proved themselves as warriors and in songs at the Mercian King's Hall the Scops, the English bards and historians of the day akin to the Skald in Scandinavia, recounted their feats in battle, comparing them favorably to their grandfather Egbert and ancestors who fought for the Pendragon Emperors and then, when the Arthurian Empire fell, to expand Wessex's power.

In early April, while attacking deeper into Wales, the West Saxon force was ambushed by a Welsh war party led by a certain Madoc ap Rhys, a minor nobleman of the Kingdom of Powys, the State attacking Mercia.

The battle was a fierce one. Ethelbald losing his index finger on his left hand when a Welsh sword sliced through it during combat and Ethelwulf lost his favorite horse, the poor animal taking an arrow through their neck, the King thrown to the ground and only narrowly missing being impaled by Welsh spears, able to roll out of harm's way in time.

Madoc's daring attack killed over fifty Saxon warriors and wounded twenty more, but it did not achieve the goal he wished, which was the total destruction of the English force. Falling back into the forests he and his surviving men escaped only to die two weeks later in another ambush, this time a failed one, against a combined West Saxon and Mercian army led by the two Kings.

The end of April saw Powys' Overlord, Rhodri, King of Gwynedd, make peace with the English in order to stop the ravaging of his lands. The three Kings signed a peace treaty and drank together to celebrate, Ethelbald and Etheberht permitted to join in.

With the victory over the Welsh complete Ethelwulf and his sons returned to Wessex with great battle honours. Upon

arriving home the King was approached by Edwulf with a letter from Rome.

It was written by Pope Leo IV, Joan's successor, asking for Ethelwulf to come to the Holy City personally on pilgrimage. The King, unburdened now that the Welsh were under control and Vikings were few, accepted the offer. He wanted to visit Rome to find a sense of peace that eluded him in England where he still felt his wife's presence.

He chose Alfred and Ethelred to accompany him, thinking it would do the two well to get away from the Court for awhile. Edwulf, of course, agreed to go along to look after his brothers, a decision that caused Edith to complain.

Leaving Wessex in the hands of Ethelbald, Ethelberht, and the Witan the King left England on May 1st, landing in West Francia a few days later, staying with Charles the Bald which gave Alfred and Ethelred the chance to play with Louis and Lothair once more, the four friends running about the Frankish royal residence with abanadon, poor Edwulf trying to keep up with them.

While the children played Ethewulf and Charles spent time together, the two Kings discussing many things in regards to their two Kingdoms. Charles wished to form a permanent alliance with an English Kingdom and Wessex, being as it was the preminent Kingdom in England at the time, having control

over Surrey, Sussex,, Essex, Kent and assertinng Overlordship over Mercia. Ethelwulf was High King over much of England, only the Northern English fended off his overlordship with any success.

Charles, knowing of Lady Osburga's untimely death, proposed a match between Judith, his eldest daughter, now twenty three, and Ethelwulf, to secure an alliance between the two nations.

The West Saxon monarch did not desire a wife and told his friend as much. He needed time to heal. Charles, respecting this, did not press the issue, but it never left his mind. He planned on asking again in future.

After spending time at the West Frankish Court the West Saxons headed into Italy where Pope Leo greeted them in Rome. Despite what one might expect considering what occured during Edwulf's last visit they did not treat him differently, showing him as much respect as the rest of Ethelwulf's family.

They ended up staying an entire year in Rome living in quarters adjacent to the Papal palace. Ethelwulf, surrounded by relics of Christian history and speaking with the Pope on a near daily basis, slowly began to recover from Osburga's passing. His grief never truly healed completely, but he learned to live with it and accept it. Like Alfred he would

cherish her memory for the rest of his life.

On the way back from the Vatican Ethelwulf stopped in Laon and arranged a marriage between himself and Judith, realizing the importance of establishing a strong link between the two Kingdoms. When the marriage was complete the King began preparing to return home, only to learn a heartbreaking truth.

Ethelbald and Ethelberht, enjoying their power too much, decided to rebel when news arrived their father was returning. Ethelbald declared himself King of Wessex and granted his younger brother the Kingship of Kent and Surrey.

Both refused to submit.

Left with no choice Ethelwulf, with an army lent to him by his new father in law, invaded his own Kingdom, Edwulf his second in command for this campaign, Alfred and Ethelred left in the hands of their new stepgrandfather.

Ethelwulf's Frankish army landed in Kent and almost immediately clashed with the local Kentish Fyrd. The Franks prevailed and allowed the King to push inland where Ethelberht met him with his own men, the two sides engaging in three skirmishes before the younger man, fearing he could not overcome the more experienced King and Thane, retreated into Wessex, leaving Kent to be taken by Ethelwulf.

In Wessex Ethelbald and his advisers Ealhstan, Bishop of Sherborne, and Eanwulf, Ealdorman of Somerset, desperately struggled to devise some sort of battle plan to combat the King but none of the men were able tacticians and soon fell into arguing amongst themselves, allowing Ethelwulf's Franks to advance into the Kingdom.

Thankfully for the West Saxon people there would be no large civil war. Ealhstan and Eanwulf finally getting through to the two rebellious brothers to make peace with their father.

However neither Ethelbald or Ethelberht would agree to let him become sole King again. Ethelbald in particular refused to give up the Wessex Crown. Ethelwulf, to avoid further bloodshed, accepted the division of the Kingdom. He would take the eastern half of Wessex and Ethelbald would receive the western portion, Ethelberht returning to Kent and Surrey as their King.

In eastern Wessex Ethelwulf established his new Court, bringing over Alfred, Ethelred and his new wife under the care of Edwulf. One of his first orders of business was to put down a Will as he was in his late fifties then and, while not considered too old even in ancient English society, he wanted to ensure his sons received what he wanted them to receive in the event he passed away.

In spite of their rebellion the King left Wessex and Kent and

other domains to Ethelbald and Ethelberht, knowing that even had he wished to give it to his younger sons they would have rebelled again to retain what they had therefore Ethelwulf did the sensible thing.

He ordered his wealth to be divided equally among his sons and Ethelswith. The King also provided instructions that some of this wealth was to be used to provide the poor with food.

Once his Will was finished Ethewulf settled in to rule eastern Wessex and he did so well, having no trouble and able to live the last two years of his life in peace. He passed away peacefully in his bed at the age of fifty nine on January 13th, 860 and was laid to rest in the town of Sheyning, Sussex.

The peacefulness of Ethelwulf's passing was quickly shattered by Ethelbald who forcibly married his father's widow, his own mother in law, and proclaimed her Queen of Wessex. This was in violation of Catholic law which forbade such close relations from marrying, but Ethelbald ignored it, seeing in Judith the tool he needed to forge more stronger links with the Franks.

It was also a dangerous time for Alfred, now twelve, and Ethelred as Ethelbald and Ethelberht made no secret of the fact they believed their parents had favored them in life. To keep his youngest brothers safe Edwulf took them from the eastern region to his estate in Somerset where they lived with his family in comfortable, if tense, circumstances.

In February of 860 a Viking raiding party attacked Kent. These raiders, looking for slaves as well as silver, struck several Kentish villages and established a base in one so they could raid farther afield.

This raid, unsual as Vikings, known for preferring summer weather, rarely attacked early in the year. Ethelbald ordered Edwulf, the most experienced warrior in the Kingdom now that their father was dead, to go to Kent and deal with them.

Edwulf agreed only if Ethelbald would leave Alfred and Ethelred in peace, to which the new King promised. With this agreement struck the Thane set out to Kent with an army of two hundred West Saxons raised from Somerset.

The Thane, as his younger brother and King believed he would, managed to defeat the Vikings and drive them from Kent, killing twenty of them in the process and liberating one hundred men and women meant to be sold as slaves.

Returning as a hero to Wessex Edwulf was granted a new estate with good farm land by Ethelbald but he refused it, content with what he already had. Instead he asked his brother to give the estate to a poor family to live in.

Baffled by this request Ethelbald agreed, Edwulf selecting an elderly couple close to his home who he knew were having a hard time producing anything from their own farm. Giving

them enough coin to hire farm hands the Thane set them up for a comfortable living in their twilight years.

After the battle with the Northmen Ethelbald's reign was largely ueventful. He and Judith had no children despite trying several times. He reigned for two years until dying in 862, being succeeded to the throne by Ethelberht.

By the time Ethelberht came to the throne he and his youngest brothers had reconciled. There was no longer any hostility or tension between them and he invited both back to the capital, which they accepted.

Once back in Winchester Alfred continued his great love of learning, studying the Bible daily, writing his own poetry, and 'fooling around' with the household servants, taking after his father in this respect most certainly.

These young love affairs resulted in two sons. Oswald, born in 864, and Osferth in 865. Both were acknowledged by him immediately after birth, their mothers allowed to raise them at court where Alfred took an active role in their upbringing.

During Ethelberht's reign Surrey, Essex, Kent and Sussex were finally absorbed into Wessex proper. No longer were they Kingdoms under West Saxon Overlordship, now they were stripped of their distinct status and made into counties, an Ealdorman being appointed to rule each, all scions of their

former ruling dynasties.

To strengthen ties with the Kingdom of Mercia Ethelberht arranged the marriage of Ethelred to Wulfthryth, the younger sister of a Mercian nobleman named Ethelwulf, son and grandson of the Mercian Kings Cynhelm and Coenwulf respectively.

The siblings' father died when both were young, murdered by his sister Cwenthryth in the hopes that, should her father have no mature male co-ruler, he would be forced to choose her to succeed. The Princess, not having the resolve to do the deed herself, had her lover, a young warrior named Askobert, do the deed for her.

He lured the King into the forests of Worcestershire on the pretense of going on a hunt. Cynhelm, havning no idea what he planned, was happy to go. For a full day the two men hunted and talked like they had before in court. The following day, July 17th, 821, while walking through the Clent Hills, Askobert took the King by surprise and before Cynhelm could even think to defend himself the warrior swung his sword down, decapitating him.

As Cynhelm's body fell Askobert saw his soul leave in the shape of dove, flying off and disappearing, the murderer in shock.

He invented a story about being attacked by bandits once he returned to Tamsworth, capital of Mercia and led a party of men back into the forests to retrieve the King's body.

Of course this plan failed to get the results Cwenthryth thought they would. Her uncle Ceolwulf being named her father's co-ruler and successor. Askobert, his conscience getting the better of him, eventually confessed to the murder and was swiftly executed. Cwenthyrth, as a Princess, and due to Coenwulf not wanting to lose any more children, was spared death. Instead she was forced to become a nun and would later become Abbess of Winchcombe Abbey, the very place where Cynhelm was laid to rest. She died in 838, alone and unmourned.

Ethelwulf and Wulfthryth were brought up by their mother, a half Mercian, half Cornish Lady named Anna. A descendant of Thomas Pendragon, the fourth son of Arthur Pendragon and his wife Guinevere on her mother's side, Anna held estates in both the Kingdom of Cornwall and in Mercia as her father was Cuthred, a Mercian Prince, younger brother of Coenwulf, who became King of Kent in 798 after his brother conquered the realm and gave it into his care.

The wealth Anna drew from her estates allowed her to raise her children without a male providing support and she made sure Ethelwulf grew to become a skilled warrior while

Wulfthryth became a well educated woman, both intellectually and in the ways of a court lady.

Despite the large age difference between Ethelred and Wulfthryth, she being in her early forties and he only eighteen, the two had a happy and successful marriage, having two sons, Ethelhelm in 864 and Ethelwold in 865 and a daughter, Thyra, in 867 who would go on to marry Gorm Harthacanutesson and become Queen of Denmark..

Upon the marriage of his sister into the West Saxon royal family Ethelwulf was made Ealdorman of Berkshire and given a place at the Witan, becoming well liked by his brothers in law as well as by the Berkshire people at large.

While he was good at playing matchmaker for his sibling Ethelberht was not so good with playing matchmaker for himself. He never married or fathered an heir, and events in England would soon prove such a thing was needed.

In 864 a Viking army invaded Wessex, reaching all the way to the capital of Winchester before Ethelberht, Edwulf, Ethelwulf, and Ethelred were able to lead their men to a victory in a day long battle and drove them out. They didn't leave England however, instead the Northmen retreated to Kent where they sacked dozens of villages before the King was finally able to destroy them in a final battle.

This battle, sadly, would prove to be his end.

Ethelberht, a warrior King like his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, would be struck down in the final hour of battle. A Danish war axe cleaving open his right shoulder and cutting into his face, demolishing it. His body was retrieved from the battlefield by Edwulf, his second in command, and taken back to Winchester for funerary rites before finally being laid to rest in Sherborne Abby.

Ethelred succeeded to the throne without issue, just in time to witness the greatest threat to England's existence arrive on its shores a year later.

Chapter 3: The Sons of Ragnar

The name Ragnar Lothbrok was a legendary one in the Norse world of the 800s. Dragon slayer, King of Denmark, Viking raider and plunderer, Ragnar was the eptiome of the Norse warrior and his legend long outlived the man himself.

Ragnar, like many Vikings after him, raided English shores, dying in Northumbria in 817 against the forces of King Eanred and his sons Aella and Osbert.

His death shook the Scandinavian world but it did not deter others from venturing West, including his sons led by his eldest Godred.

The sons of Ragnar established themselves in Ireland, establishing the Kingdom of Dublin, using it as a base to raid the other Irish Kingdoms and Britain, taking control of the western Scottish Isles and the Isle of Man in 853 after slaying Godred MacFergusa, the half Irish, half Norse King of the Isles and brother in law of Kenneth MacAlpin, the man who reunited Scotland into a single Kingdom after the Arthurian Empire fell, establishing their Dynasty as the one of the most powerful in the British Isles.

In 864, while the West Saxons fought off their own Viking attack, Godred Ragnarsson led a raiding campaign into Northumbria, but unlike other times the Northern English were ready.

Godred was captured after a defeat in battle and executed via being thrown into a snake pit, mocking his killers by saying his sons, once they learned of the manner of his death, would exact a bloody vengence against the Kingdom.

He was right. When word reached Denmark of how the King died his ten sons, led by the eldest, known to history as Ivar the Boneless due to a congenital disease that prevented him from walking, gathered a massive army to invade England.

They just didn't want to make the Northumbrians pay. They wanted all of the English to pay for their father's death.

Thousands of Viking warriors descended on the English Kingdoms in 865, led by Ivar, his brothers, and his son Guthrum. The English and Scandinavian chroniclers of later years called them the Sons of Ragnar which, while not technically correct, being his grandsons, it speaks to the fact that they came from him and were, in more ways than one, his sons.

Ivar and his warriors swept through Northumbria in a brutal campaign of slaughter, defeating the two Kings Aella and Osbert in battle, killing Osbert in the fighting and executing Aella afterwards through the gruesome ritual of Blood Eagle, and ravaging the Kingdom before selecting a man distantly related to the dead Kings, Egbert, to be their puppet.

The speed in which Aella and his brother lost the Kingdom shocked every other English State, not least of all Wessex. Ethelred and Alfred ordered the Fyrds to train daily and they listened intently to what the Northmen did from then on.

For Alfred especially it was a hard time as he had only recently begun suffering severe pains in his abdomen combined with bloody, loose stools. He did not know what caused this, and people would not know for many centuries to come, but what Alfred suffered from was Ulcerative Colitis, an inflammatory

Bowel Disease which leaves those affected with periods of extreme pain, exhaustion, and trouble sleeping and eating.

Ivar the Boneless and his brothers left Northumbria and ravaged Mercia, forcing Burgred, Ethelred and Alfred's brother in law, to pay them tribute in order to receive peace, then they went into Kent where they again butchered, defeating a West Saxon army commanded by Ethelred, Burgred and Edwulf and conquering the region before returning North after Ethelred and his brother in law paid them more, taking an (as each side knew) meaningless oath of loyalty to Ivar as Overlord.

For four years there was an uneasy peace between the remaining English Kingdoms and the Northmen. In this time Ethelred, with the aid of Edwulf, his top advisor, built up Wessex's defenses in case the forces of Ivar decided to 'pay them a visit'.

In this time Ethelred arranged a marriage between Alfred and a relative of Wulfthryth named Ealswith.

Ealswith was the daughter of Ethelred Mucel, a Mercian nobleman and Ealdorman of the Gaini tribe, one of several Anglian tribes that made up the Kingdom. Through Ethelred Mucel's mother, Ealswith was descended from Uhtred, King of the Hwicce tribe and a descendant of Eanhere, the Duke of the Hwicce under the Pendragon Emperors.

Through her mother Eadburga, Ealswith was the granddaughter of King Wigmund of Mercia, great granddaughter of both Ceolwulf and Wiglaf of Mercia, and through Wiglaf descended from Penda, the last Germanic Pagan ruler of Mercia and one of the greatest Generals who served the Pendragon Dynasty in the late stages of the Empire.

This match greatly enhanced Alfred's prestige with Mercia and brought the two Kingdoms closer together. Ealswith was a polite, religious woman which suited Alfred well as he too was a devoutly religious man. They had a happy marriage.

In 869 the Great Heathen Army, as Ivar's warriors were called by the English, invaded the Kingdom of East Anglia suddenly. The East Anglian King, Edmund, believing the Vikings were God's way of punishing his people for their many sins, did not do a thing to stop them and they tore the people apart, leaving thousands dead in their wake.

Edmund himself would fall to the Northmen, Ivar having him tied to a tree and shot full of arrows when the man refused to renounce Christianity. When Edmund did not die Ivar beheaded him.

Once Edmund was dead the Sons of Ragnar chose two men unrelated to the royal family, Ethelred and Oswald, to rule as their puppet Kings, being under the control of Ivar's son

Guthrum who was named East Anglia's Governor by his father.

The conquest of East Anglia was the end of Ivar's English adventures. Leaving the Great Heathen Army in the hands of his son and others, he returned to Ireland where he continued to expand his territories before dying, along with his younger brother Olaf, in 874 during a failed invasion of Scotland.

In the summer of 871 a new fleet of Northmen arrived under the command of a Jarl named Bersi, sent by Guthrum's maternal uncle Godfrid who acted as regnant in Denmark for Ivar.

This new army, known as the Great Summer Army, linked up with the son of Ivar and his warriors and prepared to attack Wessex, which they did months later in December, invading the territory of the Readingas tribe. Edwulf and Ethelwulf led the West Saxon host out into the field against them and for a full month they battled them, dealing them a great blow at the Battle of Englefield on the 31st.

However Edwulf, badly wounded in his lower leg, needed to receive medical attention in Winchester and so left the army in the sole control of Ethelwulf, a choice Wessex would regret.

On January 4th, the West Saxons approached the city of

Reading where the Vikings were encamped. The Ealdorman of Berkshire, confident in his ability to lay siege, made his way to the gates to surround it, being fooled by the Northmen into thinking they were too afraid to come out.

As soon as he got close the gates swung open and hundreds of battle hardened warriors poured out. Ethelwulf and his men, caught off guard, stood little chance, swarmed and massacred on the spot.

When news reached Winchester of the Ealdorman's death and defeat in battle the same day it took place the King decided he needed to lead his men in person, much to the displeasure of the Witan and his wife. The Witan argued that, as one of the last two legitimate surviving members of Egbert's line he needed to remain at the capital and send another in his place.

The problem was there was no one to send. Edwulf's wound was too grave for him to walk, let alone command troops in battle. Alfred was, as yet, untested in battle, having only ever once went into the field but never saw combat as Ethelred and Burgred paid the Danegeld, and veterans of his father's wars with the Northmen were too elderly to lead.

He needed to do it himself, to prove to his people he was a worthy man to follow. Alfred was the first to encourage his brother, reminding him of how well he fared when the Northmen attacked Winchester in Ethelberht's reign. Ethelred

in turn asked Alfred to accompany him, needing the support only family could provide.

Ulcerative Colitis had made the Prince a shadow of himself. Pale, sickly, and barely able to eat a full meal in those days he was hardly the image of a great Germanic war leader like Beowulf and others in the Germanic tradition and he himself knew this.

What's more he was now a father to a daughter, Ethelflaed, and he considered how it would be for her to grow up without him should, God forbid, he fall in battle. This line of thought was quickly squashed though when he remembered his nephews.

Before Ethelred set out to meet the Vikings Alfred attended Winchester Cathedral, the most beautiful Church in all of Wessex, to seek advice from its priest, a cousin of the Prince through his mother named Oswulf.

The two stood before the Cross as Alfred explained his reluctance to march alongside his brother. It was not, he told Oswulf, that he feared death or bodily harm, he accepted them as readily as he did Christ, but he worried his weak state may influence how the troops saw his family and Ethelred generally.

Oswulf understood his troubles but reminded him that he

could not hide behind Winchester's walls forever. God, his cousin told him in no ucertain terms, had placed this infliction upon him as a challenge to see whether he would rise above it or let it crush him.

To counter this Alfred referenced the histories of their people and traditions. The greatest heroes of their people were unblemished, near perfect men and women. To this Oswulf only smiled, petting his younger cousin on the hand.

All people, the priest pointed out, have their challenges, physical or otherwise, even the great heroes of old. They felt paralyzing fear. Faced doubt. Made mistakes. But what defined them was that they did not give up. He needed to put his faith in Christ and fight for his people, putting aside his own feelings to safeguard his Kingdom.

The Father's words touched his younger cousin and that night Alfred told his brother he would join him.

The next morning, January 5th, the two sons of King Ethelwulf marched out of Winchester with their men, being joined by Heahmund, Bishop of Sherborne with a host of his own. Together the three men rode into Readingas territory and met the Northmen forces below a ridge known as Ashdown.

Ethelred and Bishop Heahmund decided to pray before battle in the King's tent, taking their elite troops with them, while

Alfred waited outside with the rest of the warriors.

The prayer turned into a full blown Mass service, delaying the West Saxon force far too long and worrying Alfred to no end as the Vikings began to take the field, but when he tried to persuade Ethelred to cut it early the King refused, saying he would hear it all first.

To this the Prince balked. Mass was important, but what good was it if you were dead? Leaving his brother and the Bishop in the tent Alfred strode out, his fear and worry from the day before gone.

Rallying the West Saxon warriors under him the Prince charged up the hill towards the Northmen, engaging them in a fierce clash. The two sides fought for over half an hour before Ethelred and Heahmund, their Mass finally over, came to the Prince's aid with their men. The King led a cavalry charge which broke one portion of the Viking shield wall and allowed his men to close in on them.

The disadvantage of having the low ground proved not to be an obstacle, the Wessex force defeating Guthrum's warriors and driving them from the field, killing Bersi and five other Chieftains. The Saxons continued to hunt the Northmen well into the night, killing ones they found, giving them no mercy just as the Northmen showed none to so many East Anglians and Kentish in the past.

Fourteen days later the two sides met again at the Battle of Basing but this time the Northmen prevailed, both sides suffering heavy losses and forcing them to take time to rebuild themselves.

Two months later, on March 22nd, close to the village of Marten in Wiltshire, Guthrum and his men clashed with the West Saxon brothers again. Ethelred divided his forces into three halves. One was commanded by the King, the second Edwulf, now fully recovered, and the third by Alfred.

Bishop Heahmund, offering Mass (a short one this time) for the men before battle, also took part in the fighting, being slain during the closing hours and was later made a Saint by the Catholic Church for defending Christians against Pagan invaders.

Another to die from wounds he received at Marten was Ethelred. While he survived the battle and led his warriors to a great victory, he suffered two wounds to his abdomen that would not heal.

As he lie dying in Winchester he and Alfred discussed the succession to the throne. Ethelhelm and Ethelwold were both still too young to inherit the Crown, and child Kings made for dangerous times.

Edwulf, while a brilliant General and advisor, could never be

accepted as King due to being born out of wedlock. It did not matter how qualified he may have been.

So Alfred, whether or not he liked the idea (he didn't) was the only rational choice being the last surviving mature male in the senior line of descent from Egbert.

When Ethelred passed away in late April the youngest child of Ethelwulf and Osburga ascended to the throne, but his reign started poorly. While he was attending his brother's funeral the West Saxons under Edwulf suffered a hard defeat outside of Reading by Guthrum's forces and later in May Alfred, in his first battle as King outside the village of Wilton, Wiltshire, was delivered a crippling blow.

Realizing there was no way to win the war Alfred swallowed his pride and met Guthrum and his uncles Halfdan and Ubbe at the negotiation table. Here the King agreed to pay them the hated Danegeld in exchange for peace. Guthrum accepted on behalf of his father and the Northmen left West Saxon lands, giving Alfred several years of peace.

During this time the Vikings ousted Burgred from Mercia in 874, replacing him with Ealswith's great uncle Ceolwulf, son of King Wigmund, who took the throne as Ceolwulf II. Alfred's sister, declining his request to return to Wessex, followed her husband into exile in Italy where she died decades later.

As bad as this may have been for Alfred there was one bright spot. In June of 874 Ealswith gave birth to their second child and their first son, his heir. They named the new baby Prince Edward.

Chapter 4: The Outlaw King

Wessex's peace lasted until 878, Guthrum content to rule over the territories his father and he carved out for themselves. But his uncle Ubbe, whispering in his ear of the glory to be gained by eliminating the last Native English Kingdom, stirred the son of Ivar's ambitions again.

He wanted to be King of England, the first man to unite all the Kingdoms under one ruler. and to that end he planned in secret throughout 877 with his uncle and close advisors.

Meanwhile in Wessex Alfred was enjoying his life as a family man and King. By day he sat at court listening to concerns of nobles and commoners alike, passing laws and settling disputes. In the evening he enjoyed supper with Ealswith and all of his children, Oswald and Osferth included.

It was also during these years of peace that Alfred began

translating works from Latin into West Saxon including some of the works of Saint Augustine and many of King David's psalms, the latter truly being a labour of love as Alfred revered the Israelite King not only as a great warrior and man of God, but also as an ancestor to his family.

In 877 Ealswith gave birth to another healthy child, a daughter the happy parents named Ethelgifu. Alfred kept close tabs on Ethelhelm and Ethelwold, making sure both boys received good educations and the finest weapons training.

877 was also the year that Ealhmund joined the royal household guard, desiring to follow in his father's footsteps and Alfred was happy to have his cousin protecting his family. Edwulf , being sixty three now, did his best to slow down and enjoy his elderly years, though he often found himself among the Witan debating issues alongside his youngest brother, the two having a semi father and son bond.

This was the atmosphere at the celebrations of the holy day of Epiphany at the royal estate of Chippenham, Wiltshire, shortly after Christmas, 878.

Alfred, his wife, their children, Osferth and Oswald, Edwulf and his family and countless others gathered at the estate to feast, drink, and make merry. They held Mass, played games, and enjoyed themselves well into the night.

They had no idea Guthrum was coming.

The Viking warlord and his uncle, sneaking across the border of Wessex undetected, swept down on the merrymakers in a surprise attack unequaled in all of Wessex's history.

It was slaughter.

Unprepared the West Saxons stood little chance against the battle crazed Northmen descending upon them. Edwulf, his protective instincts kicking in, got his brother and his family to safety immediately while the royal guards defended them as best they could.

As mentioned earlier Pope Joan's son Edwulf fell during this attack, giving his life so Alfred and his family could live. Dozens of others fell to, both guards and guests, cut down by Viking swords, axes, and spears.

Ealhmund, when it became clear there was no hope of reversing the tide of battle, retreated with a handful of men and regrouped with his father, mother and the King, the royal unit heading deep into the forests to hide from the Vikings.

The attack on Chippenham crippled Alfred nearly to the point of no return. His forces, unprepared as they were, stood little chance in repulsing Guthrum, the son of Ivar defeating several noblemen who tried to force them back over the following days, and no one knew where the King was or even if he was

still alive.

He was very much still alive and watching the Danes conquer his Kingdom piece by piece but there was little he could do about it.

By the end of January all of Wessex was under Guthrum's control, the West Saxon nobles still alive choosing Wulfhere, Ealdorman of Wiltshire, to make peace with the Danish warlord.

Wulfhere and the others swore oaths to the Danes, throwing off their loyalties to the House of Cerdic and becoming vassals to the Dynasty of Ivar.

This put Alfred in a horrible position. His own noblemen turned against him and his family, going over to the enemy. Guthrum declared him an Outlaw and demanded he be found and brought to Winchester.

To avoid this Edwulf led his brother and those still loyal to him to the most remote area he knew of, an island in the Somerset marshes called Athelney.

Athelney, home to a small population of farmers and hunters, was by no means a comfortable place to live but, having little choice, Alfred accepted it and the people welcomed them without hesitation.

Set up with a couple and pretending to be travelers the royal

family and Edwulf's spent their early days on the island figuring out what they were going to do.

Some in the royal retinue suggested Alfred flee to Francia like his brother in law had several years before, insisting it was the only way to guarantee the bloodline of Cerdic survived, but the King staunchly refused this option.

To him fleeing to Francia meant admitting defeat and sealing England's fate as a Danish possession. He owed it to his ancestors, and most importantly, to his people to remain on English soil and fight, even if it meant he died against the Pagans.

Instead, with the blessing of Ealswith, he and Edwulf led the small number of warriors he still commanded on raids against the Northmen and their allies. They raided farms, estates, and patrols, sparing no one they came across whom they deemed guilty of treason. These attacks showed that the King was still alive and in Wessex, causing Guthrum to push harder for his men to find him.

The raids, however, did not do much besides prove to be a thorn in the Danes' side, and Alfred knew this, growing ever more depressed.

It was on one of those depressed days, on March 5th, when the woman of the house he was staying at asked him to watch

over some cakes while she went out to run some errands.

Alfred took to his task but soon, overcome by both mental and physical exhaustion, fell asleep and the cakes burnt.

Woken up by the woman's shrieks Alfred apologized for nodding off but the woman gave him a good tongue lashing. The King could have stopped her at any time and demanded she apologize for disrespecting him but he didn't. He let her vent her anger and took his lashes well, feeling she had every right to be mad at him.

After this scolding the King, leaving Athelney by himself for a bit, walked through the forests close to the marshes, struggling to understand what he must do to save Wessex, and England itself, from falling under Danish rule.

Suddenly another man appeared on the forest road dressed in a traveler's cloak. Alfred, taking no chances, drew his sword as the man approached.

An elderly Saxon the man asked if the King had any food to spare as Danes had raided his farm and stole his crops. Alfred reached into his pocket and pulled out the only food he had on him, a hunk of bread, giving it to the stranger.

The man thanked him profusely before munching on the food and heading off, disappearing down the road. Alfred watched him go, troubled that one so old needed to experience such a

fate.

Later that night while Alfred slept he had a dream where the exact same man appeared, this time surrounded by pure, bright white light.

He introduced himself as Cuthbert, a name Alfred recognized immediately as Cuthbert was a Scottish Saint of Anglian descent who lived during the final years of the Arthurian Empire and was revered by the English of all the Kingdoms and was regarded as the patron Saint of Northumbria, the Kingdom he died in around 687.

For his kindness Cuthbert promised Alfred he would be his protector. He explained he could not prevent him from dying or failing, as such things were in the hands of men, but he swore to help give him strength. Courage, and the wisdom he needed to fight the invaders.

Cuthbert ended his dream by telling Alfred he was the man England needed. That he was the man who could rally the English and defeat the Danes, but he must try with all his heart and trust in himself.

Then the King awoke, amazed at what he heard.

He got up slowly as not to wake Ealswith and went to Edwulf's quarters. He knocked on the door and when his elder brother answered Alfred explained he needed to discuss a dream.

Edwulf (and Edith) weren't pleased.

A dream is a dream the Thane said and was about to shut the door when the King said it came from Saint Cuthbert.

Edwulf, as firm a Christian as Alfred, took this seriously and the two brothers went out into the cool night air to discuss it.

Alfred told Edwulf what Cuthbert told him. He wasn't sure he could believe it. The fate of England in his hands? He was an outlaw in his own land!

It was then that Edwulf told him of the dream their father had before his birth, of the voice that foretold that Alfred was to be a crucial man in the future of the English people.

Cuthbert, Edwulf said, was just reaffirming it.

When Alfred asked how Ethelwulf's dream ended, the Thane was frank. Either Alfred would win or he would die and England along with him.

The future was fluid, ever changing, both brothers mulling over this as they looked up at the stars. As they watched Edwulf remarked how he never imagined himself living in marshland, hunted by Pagan madmen, especially at his age.

Alfred laughed. He never did either. After a moment he said something that brought a tear to his eye. Should he fall he wanted his brother to promise he would see his family to

safety in Francia, no matter what happened.

They were his life. His whole reason for being.

Edwulf swore he would and the two embraced. The elder slapping the back of the younger.

With this heart to heart conversation over the sons of Ethelwulf returned to bed. A new day awaited.

As Alfred and his family hid in the Somerset marshes in Devon the Ealdorman there refused to acknowledge Guthrum as his new Lord.

Odda son of Essa was the fifth Ealdorman of Devonshire, his ancestor Eardwulf being granted the title for services rendered in battle and Odda, a man in his prime, was eager to keep this tradition alive.

When Guthrum learned of this rebellion he sent his uncle Ubbe to crush it. The reason Ubbe was chosen was simple. Of all the sons of Ragnar Ubbe was the most blood thirsty and carnage happy one among them.

Guthrum wanted him to make an example of Odda and his entire shire. Ravage it and kill the nobleman was the order. Ubbe was happy to oblige.

With twelve hundred Viking warriors Ubbe sailed to the coast

of Devon, starting his rampage as soon as he landed, destroying villages and massacring their people.

In Ubbe's possession was the legendary Raven banner of Odin, a symbol Viking warlords and Kings used for centuries dating back to Ubbe's ancestor Odin Vingnarsson in the 1100s BC and even before. A sacred symbol of the Norse and other Germanic Pagans it gave them courage and, they so believed, the blessings of the High One.

It did little for them at Cynuit, however.

Odda and his forces, held up in Cynuit fortress, allowed the Northmen to approach, fooling them into thinking the fortress was undefended, then, when Ubbe and his men were in ten feet of the gate, the Ealdorman opened the gates and led his warriors out against the stunned enemy.

It was nothing short of butchery.

Over eight hundred Vikings died, including Ubbe Godredsson, and the Raven Banner captured by Odda's forces in a victory that resounded across Wessex, proving the West Saxons could still fight.

When the news reached Athelney it galvanized the King and Edwulf who immediately rounded up warriors and struck out on a week long campaign of raids, striking the farms of traitors and Danes alike, burning them to the ground in

bloody battles.

The victory of Odda combined with Alfred's stubborn refusal to submit to Guthrum's conquest brought many of the once submissive nobles back around to believing Wessex could be saved and even more commoners believed it.

Hundreds found their way to Athelney to join their King, including Oswulf, Alfred's cousin. Others, messengers sent by Alfred, rode to the various noblemen still loyal to him and his House, asking them to raise the Fyrd one last time.

There was to be one more battle, one that was to decide whether Wessex, and England, would become a Danish province or live free in the hands of the descendants of Angul.

As the weeks past and the English resistance grew Alfred took time away from his people to pray on his own, finding little time to do so.

He selected a spot under an ash tree, a tree long thought sacred to the Germanic peoples, both Pagan and Christian, and he sat under it in meditation, asking God for his aid.

Going deep into a meditative trance Alfred awoke to see a woman, snow white skin, covered in a blue shawl staring down at him, smiling.

Mother Mary. These were the words he thought but could not say, her presence so profound and so great it rendered him

speechless.

The peace he experienced in this moment was unlike any he had ever felt before. His worries melted away, his sadness and anger vanished.

She did not speak, but neither did she need to. Her smile and the peace the King felt was enough to tell him why she had come. To give him reassurance that all would be well, to trust in himself, a task that proved so hard to do at times.

Alfred smiled back at Mary, thanking her for her kindness. She faded away then, disappearing into the ether, leaving him with a renewed sense of purpose and a stronger resolve.

Putting his trust in himself and God Alfred began traveling Wessex in secret, meeting with the nobles still loyal to him, proving he was willing to risk just as much as they were.

While doing these 'rounds' so to speak he learned that Wulfhere, the Ealdorman of Wiltshire, was to be named the Jarl of Wessex, a new title Guthrum created as he planned to Crown himself King of England at London.

Among those who came to Alfred's aid during these meetings were foreigners, men with no ties of birth or blood to Wessex yet admired the King for his courage and dedication to his people.

One was Eldred, a Frankish born sailor who, while having an

English father from Kent, felt no strong connection to England as a whole for much of his life. But, having come to the homeland of his paternal ancestors this scion of Angul felt the need to serve under Alfred as a truly noble man fighting a righteous cause.

Another was an Italian man named Mark who, while traveling in Wessex during the attack on Chippenham, saw first hand the brutality the Northmen inflicted on the West Saxon people and, as a good Christian, felt duty bound to help in fighting their oppression, bringing him to the King.

The most surprising man to find pledging loyalty to Alfred was Cynan ap Iorveth, a Welshman from the Kingdom of Gwent who threw in his lot with the English, the age old enemies of his people, as he knew once England fell the Welsh Kingdoms were next, and he saw Alfred as the best hope for them all, so he put aside ethnic prejudices for the common good of both peoples.

Alfred welcomed them all into his service, making them warriors and granting them sword and shield.

Cynan proved to be the most trained of the three, having fought in several battles against the English, both Mercian and West Saxon, a battle hardened man who knew how to kill if needed.

He was also, to Alfred's dismay, not a Christian. While most of Wales had converted to Christianity long ago some pockets of the people still practiced their ancient faith in private, including Cynan's family.

A Celtic Pagan and a believer in the Goddess Don, the Earth Mother, Cynan was trained in the mystical arts and conversed with the dead, skills Alfred, as a Catholic, could not endorse. But, as firmly Christian as he was, the West Saxon King was not close minded to the point of intolerance.

While he did not endorse or believe in Cynan's faith he allowed him to practice it freely so long as he remained loyal to the Kingdom and its liberation.

During the nights in Athelney, as the King prepared to launch his campaign against Guthrum, Cynan, playing on his Harp, sang songs of Old Britain.

Songs about Arthur Pendragon and the glories of Arthurian Britain. Of Brutus of Troy and the beginnings of the British people so long ago.

His voice, perfect in pitch and carrying a Magical quality about it, captivated his audience, including Alfred, who sat and listened most nights. His thoughts on his ancestors, including Constantine Pendragon, Arthur's nephew and successor. He wondered how they faced their hardships, and if he would

leave a legacy his descendants could be proud of as they did.

More people came to the King's aid in the following weeks, chief among them two men of royal blood. One was Alanor, King of Cornwall, bringing with him a hundred Cornish warriors who, in order to get passed the Vikings, sailed down waterways into Wales and crossed over into Somerset.

Much like Cynan, Alanor's reasons for helping the West Saxons, enemies of his people since the days of Alfred's grandfather, was that he wanted to make sure the Vikings did not turn on his people next. Alanor was a descendant of Bledric Pendragon, son of Constantine and thus a distant cousin to Alfred, and the two celebrated this bond beside the fire that night, drinking to their shared ancestors.

The other man who arrived to Athelney was Eochaid ap Rhun, King of Strathclyde, a vassal Kingdom in the larger nation of Scotland. Grandson of Kenneth MacAlpin, reunifer of Scotland, and cousin to the current Scottish King, Gregory, Eochaid, like Alanor, crossed through Wales and entered Somerset with his band of fifty warriors, his cousin not allowing him to take more.

A mixed band of Scots and Strathclyde Britons, men related to the Welsh and Cornish, Eochaid's force was gratefully accepted by Alfred.

Together with the Fyrds of his Ealdormen these were the men the West Saxon King would take to the field and battle Guthrum with.

Near the end of April Alfred sent out messengers to his Ealdormen and called upon them to raise the Fyrd. On May first he left Athelney with his army and marched to Egbert's Stone, named after his grandfather, close to the modern village of Edington, Wiltshire, and took up position on the hill.

On May seventh Guthrum's Danes and Saxons under Wulfhere approached the hill and set up camp themselves below. The stage was set.

The next morning Alfred rose early to pray with Oswulf, his cousin acting as his chaplain. Joining him in prayer was Edwulf, Ealhmund, Mark, and Alanor. Oswulf performed a makeshift Mass, giving each man a waifer and wine, reminding them in his sermon of their duties to England and her people. He encouraged them to show no mercy to the Danes, to be swift and cold in delivering divine Justice.

Below the West Saxon camp the Northmen held a Blot to Odin, sacrificing a cow to him and asking him to give them the victory and all of England.

So confident were they and yet did not know that, during the night, the King himself had come down from the hill, cloak up,

passing through the Danish camp undetected, blending in as one of them.

Alfred spied on his enemies, listening to their conversations as, during his time, English and Danish were not as distinct as they are today. A Dane could understand an Englishman and visa versa, both languages hailing from a common Germanic core language back during the days when the ancestors of the English still lived in Scandinavia.

Once he was knew their battle plans he slipped away up the hill again, no one knowing.

Now, after Mass was finished and his men gathering about him, the King donned his armour and mounted his war horse, a beautiful dark brown animal he loved dearly named Sig.

He looked over the faces of his men, seeing young and old, eager and sullen, terrified and sad. Together with them he would fight for his homeland, he was grateful for them in more ways than his words could ever do Justice to.

His elder brother, though elderly he was, mounted up on his own horse as did his son Ealhmund, now a Thane in his own right, made so by the King for his services at Chippenham.

Alfred's speech was short and to the point. Today marked a new beginning, one where men came together regardless of class or race to stand up for what they believed to be right.

England was to be English. A land where none, English or foreign born, were to be subjected to a cruel regime of plundering Lords. Today, Alfred shouted holding up his sword, will mark the birth of a new age, and it started with them. Men united in common purpose, to free themselves from those who wished to do them and their families harm.

Finished speaking Alfred spun his horse around and with Edwulf led him to the edge of the hill, his army following behind.

Down below they saw the Northmen lining up. Some, their berserkers, wore Wolf and Bear skins over painted bare chests. One beat a drum, chanting a song praising Odin and Thor.

Edwulf whispered a prayer to God and then grasped his brother's arm, the two locking their hands together in a frim grip, promising to defend and fight for each other this day.

With everything done, Alfred led the charge.

In a fashion resembling a typical Hollywood mediveal battle the two sides met, Alfred and Edwulf leading the English cavalry in a 'bulldozing' move which smashed straight through Viking lines.

The King's sword swung down fiercely. He ignored the pain in his stomach, gnawing at him, hacking down at the Northmen

and their Saxon allies.

Edwulf and Ealhmund, working as a team, killed scores of the enemy on top of their mounts as on the ground West Saxon forces led by Cynan, Alanor, Eochaid and Oswulf fought on.

The priest, vowing to fight with his cousin even though he possessed no prior military experience, was remarkable. He slew three men and saved Cynan from being impaled by a spear, pushing the Welshmen aside and blocking it with his shield.

Alanor's Cornishmen, painted like their counterparts, were just as fercious. Joining with their Strathclyde British cousins the two created a Celtic unit of carnage, proving themselves worthy to be descendants of Heracles.

Guthrum, his Generalship superb up until now, faltered. The destruction he witnessed took him compeletly by surprise. He was not expecting the West Saxons to have so much spirit left in them, and when he saw Celtic warriors among them it gave him pause, worrying if reinforcements from Scotland or Wales may be coming.

This confusion was exactly what Alfred needed and he capitalized. Remaining on his horse for much of the battle of Ethandune, as it came to be known, the King proved himself a worthy man to follow, never shirking away from the bloody

business from which all Germanic Kings, should they wish to be taken seriously by their men, must engage, honouring a tradition as old as the Germanic peoples themselves.

By midday the battle was finished. Guthrum and his warriors fled the field in defeat, taking refuge in a fortress close by. In all two thousand of Guthrum's men fell, including Wulfhere.

Five hundred of Alfred's men perished, among them Cynan and Mark, killed when they tried leading an attack force to reach Guthrum, cut down by his Housecarls.

Edwulf, Ealhmund, Oswulf, and Eldred survived and helped the King besiege Guthrum in his fortress for fourteen consecutive days, cutting off food and water, starving the Vikings into submission.

The son of Ivar surrendered on the fifteenth day, not wanting to watch he or his men die so horribly. On condition of his surrender Alfred demanded hostages, the complete withdraw of Guthrum's army and, most crucially, he demanded the Viking warlord renounce Germanic Paganism and accept Christianity and Wessex as his Overlord. In return Alfred was prepared to recognize Guthrum as King of East Anglia and Lord of all Danes living in lands his father had conquered save for Mercia, which Alfred took under his own dominion.

Guthrum accepted all the terms, being baptized with Alfred as

his godfather, taking the name Athelstan. He followed the conditions of the peace agreement and withdrew from Wessex, settling his men down in East Anglia where he remained the rest of his life, never again going to war.

With peace finally achieved and Wessex saved Alfred returned to Winchester with his family, able to once more take up his duties as King.

The latter years of Alfred's reign passed peacefully. The Northmen under Guthrum remained in their portions of England and the two Kings, once bitter enemies, were now fast friends and brothers in Christ. In the year after the Battle Ethandune Ealswith gave birth to another child, their last, a baby boy they named Ethelweard to complete the large royal family.

In one of his most importamt decisions of his reign Alfred decreed that all children, whether high or low born, would receive compulsory education in reading and writing. He wanted a nation of learned men, not just one of warriors. With his own children Alfred made sure each had an excellent education in the arts, espescially Ethelweard who, Alfred hoped, would become a scholar.

In early March of 880 Edwulf, while attending the Witan,

suffered a heart attack and collapsed to the floor, Alfred rushing to his side. Taken to bed the Thane lingered for weeks before dying on March 25th at the age of sixty five, leaving Alfred and his family shattered.

The King made sure to give his brother a state funeral and, per Edwulf's wishes, he buried him on his estate in Somerset. Ealhmund inherited his father's wealth and position, becoming Alfred's Shield Thane and personal companion for the rest of his life and later still for his cousin Edward.

In 887 Alfred arranged for his eldest, Ethelflaed, to marry Ethelred, a leading nobleman of Mercia and a descendant of Eowa, brother of Penda. Together the two would rule Mercia as Lord and Lady under Alfred's Overlordship.

In 888 Alfred took the title of King of the Anglo Saxons, making a bold political statement. He was no longer just simply King of the West Saxons, but King of all Saxons and Angles not under Danish rule, the first English King to use the title.

The peace of his later years allowed Alfred to focus on writing and reading poetry, including his beloved Beowulf. He brought many men of learning, Irish, Frankish, Scottish, and Italian to his court in order to teach him new things, always craving knowledge.

He took care of the poor of his entire realm, giving alms and passing laws to give the homeless shelter, bread to those who needed food, and made it mandatory for churches to never turn away someone in need.

In 887 Alfred brought to his court a Welshman named Geraint who was known in his homeland as Geraint the Blue Bard. A talented historian and poet as well as a churchman Geraint came to the King's court at his request to write his biography and aid in the writing of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle a history of the British Isles from earliest times to Alfred's reign.

Geraint, taking up the name Asser, the Welsh version of the biblical name Asher, upon his appointment, went to work with gusto. He focused first on the Chronicle, seeing it completed by 889 and then set to work writing Alfred's biography.

This work, known today as Asser's Life of King Alfred was both written to provide the people with an account of the wars with Guthrum and the history of Wessex, but also it served as a testament to Alfred wanting to be remembered.

In 892 the King, wanting to expand his influence in Contiental Europe, married his daughter Elfthryth to Baldwin II, the Count of Flanders. This seemingly minor marriage at the time would, in centuries to come, have enormous effects on English history as Alfred's descendant, Matilda of Flanders, would

marry William, the Duke of Normandy, and through her he laid claim to the English throne in 1066.

As he aged Alfred's ulcerative colitis grew worse, the pain almost unbearable at times, and in 899 things began taking the turn for the worst.

On October 26th the King took to his bed and died with his wife, sons, and nephew at his side. At the end his cousin Oswulf, nearing sixty, gave him his last rites and commended him to God.

He died at 8 PM, his final moments peaceful. Before his death he instructed Edward to look after the poor and those who could not fend for themselves. To Ealswith he thanked her for their married years together.

He died a happy man, leaving behind the foundations upon which his children would continue to build, culminatining in Athelstan, Alfred's grandson through Edward, becoming the first King of a united England in 927.